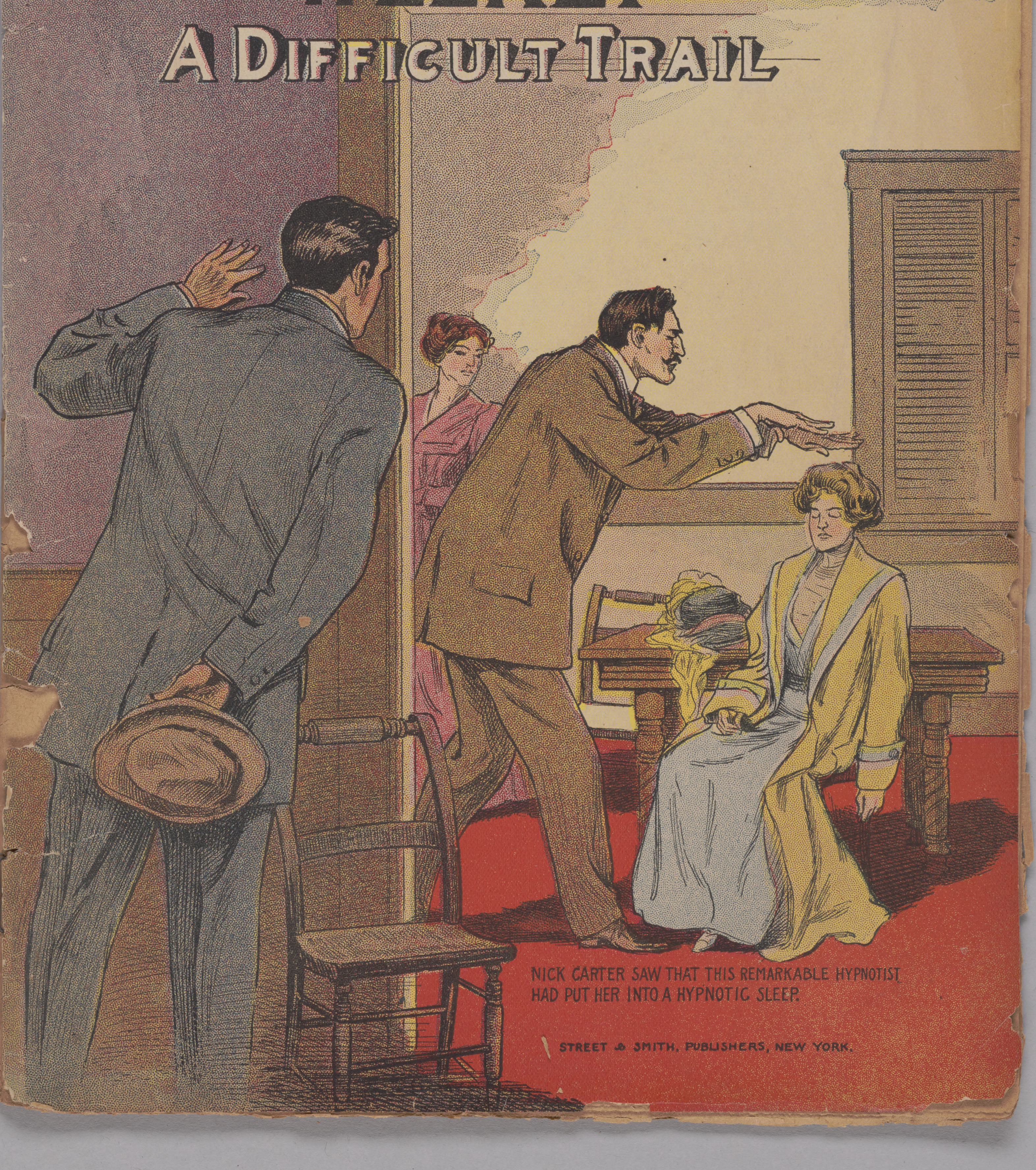
No. 777 NOV. 18, 1911 5 CENTS

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

A DIFFICULT TRAIL



NICK CARTER SAW THAT THIS REMARKABLE HYPNOTIST HAD PUT HER INTO A HYPNOTIC SLEEP.

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

Issued Weekly. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 *Seventh Ave., N. Y.*
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No. 777. NEW YORK, November 18, 1911. Price Five Cents.

A DIFFICULT TRAIL;

OR,

Nick Carter's Strange Quest.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH OF JOHN BRAYTON.

A veiled woman waited in the library at Nick Carter's house for him to appear, while, in his study, upstairs, he was studying the card which Joseph, his butler, had brought to him and which bore the inscription: "Mrs. John Brayton."

The detective knew very well who Mrs. John Brayton was. It was no doubt concerning the name of his caller that led him to stand there in the middle of the floor, scrutinizing the engraved card he held in his hand; but he was endeavoring to recall in a consecutive form the incidents which were brought to his mind by the recognition of her name.

It was approximately three months since he had seen Mrs. Brayton at her home, Brayton Braes, in New Jersey, and the circumstances connected with his acquaintance with her have been told in the history of a previous case that he had.*

At that time he had been called on the telephone by Mr. John Brayton to visit his house at once and to assist in the solution of a mystery which had occurred the preceding night. This had to do with the abduction of Brayton's nephew and the substitution of a young girl, who, eventually, turned out to be an English girl who had been imported by a set of rascals for the purpose of winning over from its rightful heir the estate of Mr. Brayton.

This girl was Miriam Archer, who was in no sense a party to the fraud that had been contemplated. She had been entirely innocent in the matter, and had been made a tool of by the designing conspirators, who hoped to obtain through her the fortune of Mr. John Brayton.

Through it all, the nephew, young Jack, as he was called, had lost his life. He had been drowned in the lake by the conspirators; and so a part of their plans had carried, as they had originally intended them to do, for Miriam Archer had been installed as a member of the household of Mr. Brayton, and had been legally adopted.

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*See preceding issue of NICK CARTER WEEKLY: "The Unfinished Letter; or, Nick Carter's Struggle with a Complex Mystery," No. 776.

Since this last event the detective had received no information concerning the Brayton affairs. But now, in his study, on this bright morning, Joseph, the butler, had brought him the card of Mrs. John Brayton, and had announced that the lady had said that the matter was very important. Joseph also had explained that the woman was in deep mourning.

These two statements of the butler, taken in conjunction with what Nick remembered concerning the Brayton family, made him pause as he had done in the middle of the floor of his study, before he descended to see the woman who had called upon him.

Presently, he laid the card aside, and went down to the library. Mrs. Brayton, whom he had met twice before, left her chair to greet him as he entered the room. She had thrown back her veil, and, although she was a woman of middle age, she was still most attractive to look upon. Her face was pallid, however, and, as Joseph had said, she was garbed in deep mourning.

The detective offered no comment and asked no questions. He merely greeted the woman as he might have done under ordinary circumstances. He waited for her to announce the purpose of her visit.

But the visitor saw, by the expression of Nick's face, that he doubtless was in ignorance of the things that had happened to her since their last meeting, and so she said, by way of opening the interview:

"You have not heard, Mr. Carter, of the death of Mr. Brayton."

"No, madam, I had not been informed of it. I am deeply shocked and grieved."

"The funeral was yesterday," she said. "He died very suddenly, four days ago."

"And is it concerning his death that you called to see me?" the detective asked.

"No, sir. Mr. Brayton was confined to his room and bed only a few days before his death. We had competent physicians, and, although he was in perfect health up to the time of this last illness, and we anticipated nothing of this kind, I have been assured that there is no reason to suppose that his death was due to anything other than natural causes."

"Then, madam, you have not come to me merely to bring me this news. You had some other reason in view."

"Yes, Mr. Carter, I did. Perhaps I have not told you the exact truth in conveying the idea that Mr. Brayton died from natural causes. Personally, I am not so convinced. I must confess that, deep within me, there are doubts which I cannot quell, and misgivings which make me afraid. That, Mr. Carter, is why I have come here to-day."

"Will you make yourself more comfortable, madam, while you tell me about it?" the detective asked. "Can I offer you any sort of refreshment?"

"Thank you, no. I will hasten through with what I have to say to you and then, if you think it necessary that we have further interviews, perhaps you will consent to come with me. I do not feel that I should be long away from home at the present time."

"Very well, madam."

"You are aware that the girl who came to our home so mysteriously was soon after that installed as a permanent member of our family?"

"Yes."

"You know that Mr. Brayton became very fond of her?"

"I assumed that much, Mrs. Brayton."

"I should tell you that I also became very fond of her—and am."

"I am extremely glad to hear that, madam."

"She has been a lovable girl, and has been all that one could expect—more than might be expected under the circumstances. We adopted her regularly into the family, according to law, and we regarded her in the same manner we would have done had she been our own daughter. From the time we adopted her she grew more solidly into our affection and esteem, and I must say that I have honored her and admired her, as well as loved her."

"This is very gratifying news, Mrs. Brayton."

"And yet, Mr. Carter, there is something—something which I cannot define, that seems to have affected Miriam of late. I noticed it—or rather I should say that I began to notice it a week or two before my husband began to complain of feeling ill."

"Wait a moment, madam. How long ago was that? I like to go at things consecutively."

The woman thought a moment, putting one hand daintily to her forehead as if to brush away the haze that shrouded recollection, and then replied:

"I think my husband began to complain about a week before he really was taken ill."

"What was the nature of his complaint?"

"I don't know that I could define that, Mr. Carter, so that it could be understood. It was a feeling of lassitude, of lack of energy, of sleepiness and of loss of appetite. Contrary to his usual custom, he began to remain in his room reading, when all his life had been an active one. I don't think there was any disorder which could be named which affected him. I should say that he merely felt badly, and was averse to anything that required energetic action."

"Very well. Proceed, madam."

"I had noticed that Miriam had spells of acting strangely before that time."

"What do you mean by spells of acting strangely?"

Mrs. Brayton sighed and altered her position, so that she could look the detective straight in the eyes.

"That is the great difficulty," she said. "I do not know how to explain what I do mean. I might describe it in this way: Notwithstanding the cloud that had settled over our household, due to the death of young Jack, and, in spite of the strangeness of Miriam's presence among us, she was light and vivacious, and full of laughter and song when there was the least excuse for her to express herself so. From my own room I could hear her singing about the house, and I want to tell you that it was a great pleasure to me. The exuberance of spirit of a young girl is always attractive; it has always been particularly so to me."

"Well?"

"The change in Miriam came about so gradually as hardly to be noticed until, one day, I recalled the fact that it was a considerable time since I had heard her voice ringing through the house in song and laughter. I spoke to Mr. Brayton about it, but he pooh-poohed the mere suggestion, telling me I was imaginative.

"But, Mr. Carter, I have watched Miriam closely, and I have studied her thoroughly. I have come to you to-day because I am convinced, particularly since the death of my husband, that my adopted daughter, Miriam, has fallen under the influence of some person or persons not known to me, and I believe that influence to be not for her good. Taken in connection with the other matters that I have spoken about, I have become obsessed by the fear that the old conspiracy against my husband's fortune is working anew against Miriam and me; and I cannot disabuse my mind of the thought that his death and Miriam's present condition are due to that fact."

"Your words suggest murder," said the detective.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, that and more. I want you to interest yourself in the matter. I want you to investigate it for me."

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN'S INTUITION.

"You own a house here in the city of New York, don't you, Mrs. Brayton?" the detective asked, after a moment.

"Yes," she replied.

"It is getting late in the season now. Isn't it almost time for you to leave your country place and come into the city to live?"

"It has always been our habit to remain in the country until after Thanksgiving. I had no thought of doing differently this year."

"Nevertheless, madam, I think it would be best for all concerned if you would move into the city."

"At once?"

"Yes."

"That can be done, of course."

"You know," said the detective, "it is very possible that the many things that have happened at Brayton Braes may have affected Miriam, as well as yourself. It is possible that her exuberance of spirit, her laughter and singing about the house, as you have described them to me, were due to efforts on her part, rather than to natural inclination, and I think, now that Mr. Brayton is gone, it would be better for both of you to have a change of scene."

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"In the meantime, while you are making this change, I will think the matter over carefully, and I will make inquiries in certain quarters concerning the persons who have done so much to affect your lives. But I must say, before we go any farther, that on the surface it would appear to me that your fears are due almost entirely to imagination."

"I thought you would say that."

"It is a natural inference, is it not?"

"Perhaps—viewed from your standpoint."

"It is a natural suspicion, Mrs. Brayton."

"Very well, sir. Have it so, if you will."

"Besides, if Miriam is here, and if it should be necessary to observe her closely, as you suggest, I will be in a much better position to do it than if she were out at Brayton Braes."

"Naturally."

"But what is it you fear regarding her?"

"I don't know."

"You spoke of the influence of person or persons unknown to you. What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know what I meant or what I mean, Mr. Carter. I am simply consumed by fear."

"Fear, madam, is the worst enemy a person ever had. Without apprehension and without fear, life would be a perfect joy to us all."

"I am well aware of that, Mr. Carter."

"Nine-tenths of the ills that we suffer are due from our imaginings, and do not exist in fact."

"Yes," she said, and tried to smile at him.

"Miriam was introduced into your house in a very strange manner. She was brought there in the night, while under the influence of a drug, she having been made to sleep so soundly that the changes that took place did not awaken her, and she was left there a perfect stranger, without in the least knowing how she came there or when she came. The same night she was taken to your house so mysteriously, your husband's nephew, Jack, was taken out of it and was drowned in the lake near by. These things naturally have affected your mind more or less deeply, and have wrought upon your imagination so that now, after the death of your husband, you are made to fear things which probably do not exist."

"Wait one moment, Mr. Carter."

"Well?"

"You referred to drugs in the case of Miriam Archer."

"Yes."

"I remember distinctly that my husband said at the time—and I think I heard you say so, also—and I am quite sure that Miriam has told me so several times—that there was no effect left upon her the morning after her experiences, as if from the influence of any drug."

"That is quite true."

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Carter, that there were other things than drugs that might have been responsible for her condition?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hypnotism, for instance."

The detective did not answer at once.

He looked at the woman for a moment closely; then he asked quietly:

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean this, Mr. Carter: Your investigations established the fact that Miriam was taken in her sleep from a house that is twenty-five or thirty miles away from Brayton Braes, and was conveyed to our home and put into my nephew's bed without waking her."

"That is quite true."

"Nothing has developed to demonstrate that a drug was used."

"That is also true."

"A child of tender years might so be taken from a bed, carried into the open air and over a journey of many miles without waking it; but it seems to me that that would be next to impossible with a girl seventeen years old."

"Yes, I have thought of that," said Nick.

"I have thought of it a great deal, Mr. Carter, and it seems to me that, in lieu of a drug, it is quite probable that hypnotic influence was resorted to."

"It is not impossible, madam."

"It is worthy of thought, at least," the woman continued. "If you should consider that view of it as logical, would it not be equally logical that the influence that was exerted over her at that time might still have its effect upon her, if the person who exercised it sought to make use of it?"

"Quite so."

"Well, sir?"

"I will look into the matter, madam."

"There is another question that arises, Mr. Carter."

"Yes."

"Where or who is the person who could and would exert such an influence?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"Have you any theory concerning it?" the visitor asked.

"Not at the present moment."

"I have."

"You have thought more deeply into this matter than I had supposed."

"I have thought about it without ceasing for weeks."

"Ever since you first noticed what you considered to be an apparent change in Miriam?"

"Yes."

"What is your idea?"

"You probably will say that it is without foundation, Mr. Carter, but, if you will bear with me a moment, and let me review the conditions as I understand them, I think I can make myself plain. If we take the things that have happened at Brayton Braes in chronological form, we must go back to the time when my husband was a boy—to the time when Black Ben Battle—the original Black Ben, father of the one who was killed in the cabin by the lake—first made his appearance there. He ran away from his country and home to live the life of a hermit over here because of the waywardness of his son, and he found that little place near Round Pond, and stayed there."*

"Well, madam?"

"He kept in communication with his family in England. Out of the things that he wrote about the people at Brayton Braes, grew the conspiracy which evidently was begun when that wayward son of Black Ben came to this country—when old Black Ben, the first, was murdered and sunk in the lake by his unnatural son, and the latter took his place. It was that man's wife who concocted and engineered the plot which took young Jack away from us and installed Miriam in his place at our house."

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*For an account of the incidents which had to do with the murder of Black Ben Battle, see "The Unfinished Letter; or, Nick Carter's Struggle with a Complex Mystery," in the last issue of this weekly, No. 776.

"Without a doubt," said Nick.

"That woman is now in prison."

"Yes."

"She has been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, and therefore is out of our reckoning."

"Yes."

"The unnatural son of Black Ben Battle, who also was known as Black Ben, is dead."

"Yes."

"The three men who were chiefly instrumental with them in carrying out the plot against us are in prison serving long terms, and there is, at the present moment, so far as we know, not one of the original conspirators at liberty or in a position to work any harm against us."

"That is quite true; and that is why I have attributed your fears to imagination rather than to facts."

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Carter, that there might be still another one of whom we have never heard?"

"Another conspirator?"

"Yes."

"It is not impossible."

"Nor is it improbable, sir."

"Perhaps not."

"You will find the explanation of all that I mean and of everything that I infer in the word hypnosis, for, Mr. Carter"—and she leaned forward to give emphasis to her next words—"if hypnotism was used in the furtherance of their plots and schemes, the person who used it was a professional and an expert, and I doubt very much if any of the conspirators whom you caught, and who are now in prison, could answer to that description."

There was logic in all that the woman had said.

It was true that it had not occurred to Nick Carter before, because, after the conclusion of the preceding case, he had given it no thought, his mind being employed by other matters.

He left his chair and crossed to the window, where he turned and faced Mrs. Brayton again.

"Let me understand one thing clearly, madam," he said to her.

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"Do you assert that it is your belief that the conspiracy against you still exists—even if in another form?"

"I do."

"Is your opinion based upon nothing more than you have told me that your husband did not die a natural death, but was made the victim of the same conspiracy which took the life of your nephew?"

"Such is my belief, Mr. Carter—based not solely upon what I have told you, but more prominently upon my intuition—a woman's intuition, you know."

"I understand you, madam. Now, tell me just what it is that you are afraid of."

"This, Mr. Carter," and she leaned forward again, speaking slowly, and with deep emphasis: "I am convinced that the original conspiracy is at work, and that its object now is—after accomplishing the death of my husband—to get rid of me, and, afterward, when Miriam shall have inherited the fortune that will be hers when I die, to seize that also—perhaps through her death."

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY.

Mrs. Brayton, after her interview with Nick Carter, returned to her car, which waited at the detective's door, and soon afterward she was being driven away toward her home in New Jersey.

The detective did not feel that the case was one which required any immediate attention, and there were several other matters on his mind which he deemed more important at the moment. And so, with the going of Mrs. Brayton, the matter was dismissed from his thoughts and temporarily forgotten.

Mrs. Brayton had consented to move into the city at once, and occupy the home on the drive, where she and her husband had been in the habit of spending their winters, and Nick had thought it best to wait until the arrival of Mrs. Brayton and Miriam there before he went more deeply into the matter. He attributed a great deal that had been said by Mrs. Brayton to "nerves"; to the natural condition of mind as a result of the rapid sequence of events that had happened in her family, beginning with the disappearance and death of young Jack, and ending with the last illness of John Brayton himself.

Mrs. Brayton had stated that the city house was entirely in readiness, and that practically all there was to do in order to make the change from the country to the metropolis was to pack a few trunks and leave.

Scarcely had Mr. Brayton left when another matter was brought to the attention of the detective. This required immediate application, and so for the ensuing three days he scarcely gave the woman or Miriam a thought.

But the matter was recalled suddenly to his attention in a most pronounced way. It was on the evening of the third day after the call upon him by Mrs. Brayton—and a very stormy and rainy day it had been, too, so that he was glad to be in his own study again arrayed in smoking jacket and slippers—when Joseph brought to him the evening papers, as was his habit whenever the detective was at home.

Almost the first thing that Nick's gaze rested upon, when he picked up one of those papers, made him start to his feet with an exclamation of astonishment and grasp the telephone which rested upon the slide of his desk. But he did not make use of it. Instead, he returned it to its former position, kicked off his slippers, seized a dry pair of shoes and adjusted them, rang the bell for Joseph and told him to direct Danny to bring the limousine car around to the door as quickly as possible.

Ten minutes later he was dashing through the rain-filled streets toward Mrs. Brayton's house in Riverside Drive.

The newspaper paragraph which had attracted his attention and affected him so suddenly was printed in red in the lower left-hand corner of the front page and beneath the caption "Latest News." It was as follows:

> "Mrs. John Brayton, of Riverside Drive and Brayton Braes, New Jersey, was found dead in her car at her own door at two o'clock to-day. She was alone in the car at the time, and the chauffeur had just driven her to the city from her country home, which she had closed for the season. It is assumed that some unsuspected functional disorder brought about her sudden and unexpected demise. The chauffeur has stated that apparently she was in good health and spirits when they came away from Brayton Braes three hours earlier, and that he had no suspicion that anything was wrong with her until he opened the door of the car in front of her New York residence."

It had been the impulse of the detective to telephone at once to the house for further particulars. But a second thought convinced him of the necessity that he should go to the house at once. Arrived there, Nick was admitted by a servant whom he had seen at Brayton Braes.

The detective stepped inside the wide front hall and closed the door behind him while the servant relieved him of his raincoat and hat.

'Is it true that Mrs. Brayton is dead?" he asked.

"It is, sir," replied the servant, in a shaking voice.

"Where is Miss Archer?"

"She has not come in yet, Mr. Carter."

"Not come in yet? What do you mean?"

"She has not arrived from New Jersey."

"She did not come here, then, with Mrs. Brayton?"

"No, sir. She was to leave late with Phillip, the other chauffeur.'

"Has she been told of what has happened here?"

"We have endeavored to communicate with her, sir, but have found it impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"She left the Braes in the other car, with Phillip driving, about an hour before we called up the caretaker there on the telephone."

"How does it happen that the ladies did not come to the city in the same car?"

"I don't know that, sir, unless—it would be only guessing; I don't know."

The detective looked at his watch and snapped it shut again.

"It's now nearly six o'clock," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"What time did you telephone to the Braes?"

"Shortly after two o'clock this afternoon."

"And you were informed that Miss Archer had left there an hour before?"

"Yes, sir."

"At half past one o'clock, then?"

"About that time."

"I have made that journey in an hour, or a little more," said the detective. "The paper says that the car which brought Mrs. Brayton here took about three hours to do it."

"Mrs. Brayton always liked to drive slowly, sir," the servant explained.

"And did Miss Archer also prefer to drive slowly?"

"No, sir; I think not."

"Then she should have been here long ago."

"I think, sir, that she should have been here by three o'clock, or a little after that—by four at the latest."

"You have heard nothing from her?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"What has been done in regard to the death of Mrs. Brayton?"

"I notified her lawyer at once, sir, and I telephoned for the family physician. Both of those gentlemen are in the library now. You will find them there, sir, if you would like me to take you to them."

The two men referred to were seated opposite each other, evidently awaiting the arrival of Miriam. They were known to the detective only by reputation, but both stood high in their respective professions, and Nick lost no time in making himself known and in explaining his sudden call. In addition to that he said:

"Mrs. Brayton called upon me not long ago, gentlemen, and made certain statements which, perhaps, should have interested me more than they did at the time. In the light of this sad event I am compelled, doctor, to ask you a few direct questions, which I hope you will not hesitate to answer. You have, of course, made a thorough examination of the body?"

"I have."

"Have you come to a definite conclusion as to the cause of death?"

"Not a definite one; no. That would be impossible under the circumstances."

"Why impossible?"

"Because there is nothing about the condition of the body which can be seen to point directly to the cause of death."

"But you have an opinion about it, doctor?"

"Certainly. To express it in the language of the layman, I should call it heart disease."

"There were no marks of violence upon her anywhere, doctor?"

"Certainly not. What do you mean by that question?"

"It isn't necessary to explain just what I mean. I merely want answers to my questions, if you will be good enough to give them to me."

"But your questions suggest——"

"They suggest nothing, doctor, beyond my curiosity as a detective and my position as an acknowledged friend of the woman who is dead."

"I see. Pardon me."

"When I asked you just now if there were marks of violence, I included all sorts of violence in that question."

"I don't think I understand you, Mr. Carter."

"Have you detected any evidence of poison having been used?"

"None at all. Really, Mr. Carter——"

"Or a drug of any sort?"

"No."

"What was the condition of the body?"

"A perfectly natural one. She simply stopped breathing. That is all."

"No evidence of suffocation in any form?"

"Mr. Carter, I will answer all your questions in one statement if you will listen to me."

"Very well, sir."

"When the chauffeur drove the car in which Mrs. Brayton was riding to the door of this house, he got down to assist his mistress to alight. Through the window of the limousine he saw that she was lying back against the cushions of the rear seat, apparently asleep."

"Wait a moment, doctor. Do you mean that her eyes were closed?"

"They were."

"Thank you. I will ask you more about that later. Go on."

"The chauffeur opened the door and called to her, and, when she did not respond, he reached in and touched her. He found then that she was dead. He left her where she was and ran into the house, where the butler, who just now showed you into this room, had stepped outside to receive his mistress. They ran down to the car together, and the butler, who had doubted until then, was instantly convinced that Mrs. Brayton was dead. He called one or more of the servants from inside the house, and, without waiting to question the legality of what they did, they carried the body into the parlor and laid it upon a couch. By this time the servants were all present. The butler then called Mr. Cummings on the telephone and informed him of what had happened. After that he called me, and I came here at once. I made a hasty examination, then went away and returned later with Doctor Powers, who sometimes assists me. It is our united opinion that Mrs. Brayton died suddenly, and without warning, from an affection of the heart which we are not prepared to define until an autopsy has been made."

"In other words, doctor, you don't know what she did die of, do you?"

"Really, Mr. Carter——"

"You don't, do you?"

"I have already told you, Mr. Carter."

"On the contrary, doctor, you have told me nothing that the chauffeur couldn't tell me just as well."

And Nick Carter turned upon his heel and left the room.

As the detective went out from the library the butler was in the act of opening the front door of the house. Nick stepped forward quickly, for, upon the threshold, pale and frightened, trembling and dripping from the storm to which he had been exposed, was the chauffeur, Phillip, who had charge of the car in which Miriam Archer was to have been brought to the city. Nick could hear him plainly enough as he almost shouted a question at the butler, crying out:

"Where is Miss Archer? Is she here?"

CHAPTER IV.

A PUZZLE OF TWO AUTOMOBILES.

The detective hurried to the end of the hall where the butler and chauffeur stood facing each other.

"Silence, both of you! Silence, both of you!" he demanded quickly. "Come in here with me." And he led the way into a reception room at the right. "Now, Phillip," he said, turning instantly to the chauffeur, who was still trembling with some sort of apprehension. "I will ask you the question that I just heard you ask of Simmons. Where is Miss Archer?"

"I don't know, sir. I supposed that she was here."

"Supposed she was here? Didn't she leave Brayton Braes in the car with you?"

"Yes, sir, but we went back there later."

"Went back to the house at Brayton Braes?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't remember."

"How far had you driven before you turned back?"

"Almost halfway, sir."

"What caused you to turn back at all?"

"Miss Archer spoke to me through the tube from inside the car and said that she would have to go back. She said that she had forgotten something that was important."

"What was it?"

"I do not know. She did not tell me."

"How long a time were you away from Brayton Braes before you returned to it?"

"Nearly two hours, I should say, sir."

"Did you go inside the house when you went back?"

"No, sir. Miss Archer told me to wait for her. She went inside, and, after a few moments, Ives, the caretaker, came out and told me to go ahead to New York, because Miss Archer had decided to take the train into the city. I wondered at the moment why she did not wish me to take her to the station, which is nearly a mile from the house, but it was none of my concern, and I drove away as I was ordered to do."

"Did Ives tell you that Mrs. Brayton was dead?"

"Yes, sir. He said that Mrs. Brayton had been found dead in the other car, and that Miss Archer would take the train to the city, where I was to go at once. That is all I know about it."

"Tell me why, when you came in at the front door, you asked for Miss Archer?"

The man was trembling perceptibly and had the appearance of one who has been badly frightened. He replied with some hesitation, but quite clearly:

"I was almost to the ferry on the Jersey side, sir, when a big car, that was strange to me, drove past me, going at a furious gait. I glanced at it, wondering why it was speeding up so in such bad going, and I was certain that I saw the face of Miss Archer through the glass window in the door. I thought that she looked out at me and made a gesture as if to attract my attention, and I was certain that she tried to call to me, although I could not hear a sound that she made; but I did see the outlines of a man behind her, who seemed to pull her back into the car and away from the window. The car was speeding so fast and went by me so quickly that I could not be at all sure of what I had seen. But it frightened me, nevertheless. Then, as I drove on along the road to the ferry, upon the boat and got to thinking the matter over, I decided that I must have been mistaken, and that the lady that I had seen at the window of the other car might not have been Miss Archer, after all. But the more I thought it over, the more I felt both ways about it. One moment I was certain that it was Miss Archer, and the next moment I was equally sure that it was not. The consequence of it all, sir, was that, when I arrived here, I was in what you would call a state of mind. That is why I asked the question I did as I did."

The detective was silent a moment. Then he said:

"Phillip, you and Simmons will keep this matter entirely to yourselves for the present. It is quite possible that you were mistaken in the identification."

"Yes, sir. I have thought of that. But one thing is certain, anyhow."

"What is that?"

"Whoever the woman was that I saw in that other car she was in trouble, and the man who was with her pulled her back out of the way when she tried to call out to me."

"We will assume, for the present, that it was not Miss Archer," said the detective. "Now, Simmons, show me to the telephone, and tell me how you call up the house at Brayton Braes."

Five minutes later he was in communication with the man, Ives, the caretaker at Brayton Braes, who, with his wife, had been in charge of the place for years. Nick, who was familiar with that part of the family arrangement, knew Ives and was confident that he was a trustworthy servant.

When Simmons and Phillip, the chauffeur, would have lingered near when he talked with Ives, for their curiosity and fears were both aroused by the rapid sequence of events, Nick Carter sent them out of the room and closed the door.

“Am I talking to Ives?” he said over the phone.

“Yes, sir,” came the reply.

“Is Miss Archer there? This is Mr. Carter who is questioning you.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Carter; thank you, sir. No, sir, Miss Archer is not here. She left for New York by train about four o’clock.”

“Who took her to the station?”

“I did, sir.”

“How did you take her there?”

“In the little runabout that is left here for my use.”

“Did you see her on board the train?”

“No, sir. It was twenty minutes late. It was storming badly, and she told me that I need not wait. I left her in the station.”

“Do you know why she returned to the house after she left it with Phillip?”

“She said that she had forgotten some papers which it was necessary that Mrs. Brayton should have.”

It should be said here that the station to which Ives referred in this conversation was a very small one. Only a limited number of local trains stopped at it, unless they were signaled to do so or had a passenger to leave. This fact will account for the next question that the detective asked.

“Were there any other pasengers at the station when you arrived there with Miss Archer?”

“I did not see any, sir, but I did not go inside. I did not leave the car at all, in fact. Miss Archer had no baggage, it all having gone in the other car with Phillip, and so it was not necessary for me to do so.”

“Did you see any other car standing at the platform of the station?”

“Do you mean another automobile?”

“Yes.”

“There was one—yes, sir.”

“Describe it to me if you can.”

“It was a big black-bodied limousine, and was, I think, a Windermere.”

“Did you notice the license number?”

“No, sir.”

“Was there a chauffeur with the car?”

“There was.”

“Did you notice him?”

“I saw him, if that is what you mean.”

“Can you describe him?”

“I am afraid not, sir.”

“Well, do it as well as you can.”

“You see, sir, he had a cap pulled well down over his eyes. He was wearing goggles, and he had on a raincoat, with the collar turned up about his ears. I can only say that he was, I should judge, a large man.”

“Was there anything about the car by which you could identify it?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Carter. Possibly I would know it again if I should see it, but certainly I could not describe it so that another would recognize it.”

“Ives, I want you to do something for me, and do it right away.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You say you have a runabout there for your own use.”

“I have, and it’s a good little car, too.”

“I want you to drive down to the station again right away. When you get there make all the inquiries you can concerning that car you saw standing at the platform when you took Miss Archer to the station. Also inquire who was in the waiting room at the time, and who took the train out of the station, and be particular to find out for me if Miss Archer actually boarded that train. If she did not, I want to be told what became of her, and I wish to be informed if she held any conversation with any person who was in that waiting room at the time she was there.”

“Very good, sir.”

“As soon as you have attended to all this, call me up on the telephone at my house and let me know what you have discovered.”

And Nick gave him the number of his private call.

CHAPTER V.

TWO PUZZLING CIRCUMSTANCES.

There was nothing more that Nick Carter could do at the Riverside Drive home of the Braytons, so he returned to his own house to await the telephone message of the caretaker at Brayton Braes.

But it was not a telephone message from the man Ives which came to him first. It was Simmons, the butler, in the house at Riverside Drive, who called him up before he had been home an hour. As soon as Simmons was satisfied that it was Nick Carter who listened to him on the phone, he said:

“I thought I ought to tell you at once, sir, that Miss Archer is here.”

“What!” exclaimed the detective over the phone.

“Miss Archer has arrived,” the butler repeated.

“When?” asked Nick.

“Just now.’

“How did she come?”

"In a taxicab from the station. The cab left her at the door."

"Well, go on, Simmons. You have more to tell about it."

"No, sir; that is all."

"How did she explain her delay in getting home?"

"She did not explain it, sir."

"Didn't she have anything to say about it at all?"

"She said: 'I am very late, am I not? I am sorry.' That is all, sir."

"How long is it now since she entered the house?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes."

"How did she look? What was her appearance?"

"Why, sir, I saw nothing out of the way about her."

"Did she seem excited, or act as if she had been in any trouble?"

"Not that I could determine, Mr. Carter. She was entirely in sorrow because of the sudden death of Mrs. Brayton, and she spoke very little to any of us; in fact, I don't think she spoke to any of us at all, save what I have already repeated to you."

"What did she do then?"

"She went in to see the body of Mrs. Brayton. She is there now."

"I will come up at once," said Nick; "but you need not tell her so."

"Suppose she should ask if you have been here, Mr. Carter?"

"In that case, of course, say that I have been there, but I think it will be just as well not to give her any information. Say as little as you can until I have seen and talked with her."

"Yes, sir."

That closed the conversation.

Nick had eaten his dinner and smoked his cigar after it. He made no haste in his preparations for departure to go to the house on Riverside Drive, for it was still early in the evening, and he preferred to give Miriam ample time to recover from the emotion she naturally would feel. But he watched the clock, and, after rather more than half an hour had passed since his talk with Simmons over the telephone, he prepared again to face the inclemency of the weather outside. He was at the front door of his house, on the way out, when he heard the telephone bell ring, and Joseph called to him to return.

Ives was at the other end of the wire.

"I have done what you asked me to, Mr. Carter," Ives said. "I have been to the station, and I have made all the inquiries."

"Well?" queried Nick impatiently.

"I don't know just what you will think of the result of them," Ives continued. "To me it seems that I have accomplished very little, although there is one thing which will perhaps interest you."

"Go on," said Nick impatiently.

"It seems, sir, that there were two persons inside the waiting room at the time I left Miss Archer at the——"

"Wait one moment," said Nick, interrupting him. "I wish first to know if Miss Archer left that station on the train that she went there to take, or if she departed in another manner."

"She did not take the train, sir. She went in the big car that I saw standing at the platform."

"Now, you're talking," said Nick. "Go on with what you have to tell me."

"There were two persons in the waiting room—at least, so the young woman who has charge of it told me."

"Well, who were they?"

"She doesn't know who they were. They were strangers to her—strangers in the locality. They were a man and a woman. The man wore automobile goggles over his eyes and had his coat collar turned up around his ears, much the same as the chauffeur outside, and my informant could not tell me anything about his description except that he was tall and heavy—probably a big man."

"Well, as to the woman?" asked the detective.

"The woman, Mr. Carter, was also so covered with clothing and was heavily veiled that the girl at the station could make nothing of her."

"She heard her voice, didn't she?"

"Yes, sir, and she believes that she would recognize it if she could hear it again. The only description that she gives me of it is that it is a lovely voice."

"Did Miss Archer talk with them?"

"She did, sir. My informant says that they talked together for some little time in an animated way, and that then Miss Archer left the station with them, entered the automobile, and it was driven away. And that, sir, is all that she could tell me about it."

"Do you know what time that happened?"

"It must have happened very soon after I left Miss Archer at the station, because the train did not yet arrive that she was to take."

"You told me, did you not, that it was reported twenty minutes late when you arrived there with Miss Archer?"

"Yes, sir, but it must have been later than that before it arrived."

"I imagine so. Now, tell me who is the young woman who has charge of the station—the one who was your informant in the matter."

"A Miss Andrews. She is the regular ticket agent."

"Has she any idea at all regarding the identity of the persons she saw in conversation with Miss Archer?"

"None whatever."

"All right, Ives," said the detective. "I think that will answer for the present. You have done very well, indeed."

"Is there anything more that I can do, sir?"

"Not unless you could induce Miss Andrews to come in to New York to see me early to-morrow."

"She will be glad to do that, sir, but I scarcely think she can tell you more than she has already told me."

"Ives," said the detective, "you are a very bright fellow, indeed, but there are lots of things that you don't know, just as there are lots of things which you do know and which you do not suspect yourself of knowing. Now, take that last statement home with you and think it over. Good night."

As the detective replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to leave the house, he thought that here were two remarkable circumstances which fitted exactly together, but for which, at the present moment, at least, there was no logical explanation.

It might develop later that the train that Miriam was to take to the city had been reported to be much later than was first supposed, and that the two persons in the car at the station were waiting for it, as she was, and that, upon being informed of her anxiety to get to the city they had offered to take her there in the big car outside which had brought them thus far, and was quite capable of taking them the rest of the distance almost as quickly as the train could do so.

But what explanation was there for the tardy arrival of Miriam at the house in Riverside Drive?

The detective entered the car which Danny had waiting him, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, he determined to worry no further about the matter until he had questioned the young woman. Doubtless she would quickly make it clear to him. For it must be said that never for one moment had Nick Carter lost his faith in Miriam Archer. He believed her to be what she had always appeared to him to be—merely a girl who had been raised in the country in England, and who was without guile in any form.

He had yet to see one thing about Miriam to suggest anything which was not in perfect accord with a high moral character, and an almost utter ignorance of the sins of the world.

Thinking thus, he entered the house on Riverside Drive to question her.

CHAPTER VI.

A VICTIM OF HYPNOSIS.

Miriam had gone to her own rooms, and Nick Carter sent Simmons up to announce him.

The night was cool, and there was an open fire burning in the chimney before which Miriam was seated, with her slippered feet at the fender of the hearth, in an attitude of utter dejection. It needed only one glance for the detective to see that the shock of Mrs. Brayton's death had affected her severely.

She arose and came forward to greet him as he entered, extending both hands in welcome. There were tears in her eyes as she exclaimed:

"Oh, Mr. Carter, I am so glad you have come. There is much that I want to tell you."

"I came as soon as I knew that you were here," the detective replied, gently leading her back to her chair and drawing another one near to it for his own accommodation. Then he added: "You were detained on the road?"

"Why, yes," she said, and there was a doubtful ring to her voice, which was something of a surprise to the detective. "It was very late when I got here."

"You came in by train?"

"Why—yes," she said simply, and stopped.

"As a matter of fact, you did not come by the train, did you, Miriam?"

"N-n-no. That is, I really don't know whether I did or not, Mr. Carter."

"Why, what do you mean by that? Don't you know how you came here?"

"I suppose I do. You see, everything has happened very strangely to me to-day."

Nick nodded.

"Tell me about it," he said. "And, Miriam, before you begin, please describe all in exactly your own way—just as it occurs to you. I mean by that that I want your impressions, as well as the facts."

She raised her eyes quickly to his, and there was a startled expression in them.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, leaning toward him.

"Has something happened to you since you left Brayton Braes, Miriam?" he asked.

"Something happened? Why, I don't think so. What could have happened?"

"You were very late in getting here. What detained you?"

"Why, the train was late—very late indeed."

"All right," he said. "Begin at the moment when you were on your way here in the car that Phillip was driving and you were somehow reminded of some papers that Mrs. Brayton had told you to bring with you."

"Oh, yes," she said, relieved. "There were some documents in an envelope in the safe in Mrs. Brayton's room. These she asked me to procure for her. In the haste of my departure with Phillip, I forgot them and did not remember about them until after we had left the house. Then I asked him to take me back again so that I could get them."

"Well?" queried Nick.

"Between my departure and return the news of—of——"

"Of the death of Mrs. Brayton," suggested Nick.

"Yes. The news had been telephoned to Ives. He told me about it. I was very much overcome. I asked him then about the trains to the city, and he told me of one which I thought I could catch. I believed it would get me here somewhat sooner than the car could do so, so I told him to tell Phillip to go on without me."

"And then——"

"Then, when I had partially recovered from the shock, Ives took me to the station. I told him that he need not wait. He left me there, and I entered the station alone."

"Were there any others there when you went into the waiting room?"

"Yes—a man and a woman."

"Did you know them?"

"No, not at all. I never had seen them before."

"You held some conversation with them?"

"Yes—I believe so."

"Who began the conversation? Did you, or did they?"

"I think the gentleman spoke to me first."

"What did he say to you?"

"He asked me if I was waiting for the train, and when I told him that I was he said that it was late. Then he told me he would find out how late it was. He went to the ticket window to inquire. He returned presently and said that it was more than an hour late. When I expressed displeasure at that, he suggested to the lady who was with him that, instead of waiting for the train, they should go on to the city in their car, which was at the station platform, and which I had noticed as I entered the waiting room."

"Well, that would suggest that you came to the city in the car with that man and woman, and did not take the train, would it not?"

"W-why—yes."

"Miriam, how does it happen that you are not certain how you came here? Don't you know whether you came in the car or by the train?"

She smiled wanly, and, with an expression that was one of almost helplessness in her eyes, she replied:

"When you ask me the question, my impulse is to reply at once that I came by train, and yet I clearly remember saying to the gentleman that I would be glad to come in the car with him. It seems to me, too, that I can recall being inside the car with them."

"But don't you remember whether you got out of a train at a station in Jersey City, or here in New York, or that you got out of a car——"

"Oh, I was at the station. I took a taxicab from the station here."

"What station?"

"The Pennsylvania."

"Don't you remember being on the train?"

"Why, I don't seem to. I think I must have been dazed—or in a dream."

"Do you remember having been in an automobile after you left the station nearest to Brayton Braes?"

"I seem to—and I seem not to."

"How do you account for this lack of memory?"

"I can't account for it."

"Do you recall any further conversation with those two persons whom you met in the station?"

"No."

"Let us suppose that you came by automobile, and not by train. Now, supposing that, can you recall any incident that happened on the road while you were coming to the city?"

She bent her head in thought, pressing her hands against her temples as she did so, and wrinkling her brows in perplexity. When she did look up, it was with a puzzled, far-away expression in her eyes.

"Really, Mr. Carter, I am terribly ashamed of myself, but I do not seem to recall anything definitely that happened to me after I began conversation with the two persons in the station near Brayton Braes until after I was walking out of the Pennsylvania Station, here in New York City, along with many other passengers," she replied. "I was surprised when I glanced at the clock and saw how late it was. I hastened to summon a taxicab and be driven here to this house. And yet, although I do not seem clearly to remember anything that happened in the interval between the two railway stations, I cannot rid my mind of the impression that I came to the city by train; nor can I escape certain memories which seem to connect my journey here with the interior of an automobile and the company of those two persons I met out there in the station.”

“Miriam,” said the detective, “do you know anything about hypnotism?”

“Do you mean mesmerism, Mr. Carter?”

“Yes; it is the same thing.”

“No,” she replied.

“Were you ever put under hypnotic influence by any person?”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

“Where, and when, and for what reason?”

“It was a long time before I left Hampton, in England. I had been troubled with my tonsils and some growths. I went to a surgeon to have them removed.”

“And you submitted to hypnotism, rather than take ether or another anæsthetic?”

“Yes, that was it.”

“You have not told me when it was.”

“It happened very soon after the death of my mother—considerably more than three years ago.”

“Was the surgeon who performed that operation himself the hypnotist?”

“No.”

“Who performed that service for him?”

“A man who was traveling through the place giving exhibitions of his skill in hypnotism. When I applied to the surgeon to have the slight operation performed and objected to the ether, he told me that he had twice performed other and more difficult operations that were quite successful when the patient was under hypnotic influence. He spoke of the man who was in the village at that time, and who had given an exhibition the preceding evening. Upon receiving my consent, the dentist made arrangements with him. That is the way it happened.”

“Can you remember the man’s name?”

“The surgeon’s or the hypnotist’s?”

“I want the name of the hypnotist, and all that you know about him.”

“He called himself Professor Aquilla. That is literally all I know about him. I never saw him before that time, and I am quite certain that I never have seen him since.”

“You saw him, did you not, when he restored you to yourself after the operation?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And you were convinced that you have never seen him since then?”

“Quite so.”

“Now, recall, if you can, the presence of that stranger whom you met in the railway station near Brayton Braes, and tell me if there was anything about him that reminded you of the hypnotist at Hampton—more than three years ago.”

“No; I don’t think so.”

“Nothing in face, manner, stature, methods—nothing at all?”

“I can’t answer the question definitely, Mr. Carter, because I don’t know. To my recollection, the hypnotist at Hampton was only an incident—just exactly as taking ether for the operation might have been an incident.”

“And yet you submitted yourself to his hypnotic influence?”

“For the sake of the operation, yes—just as I would have submitted myself to ether.”

“Have you experienced any lapse of memory since that time?”

‘I don’t think so, unless——”

“Unless what?”

“I was going to mention the time when I was taken so mysteriously to Brayton Braes, but that was done in my sleep, which doubtless was made more profound by using some drug such as chloroform. I don’t know as to that.”

“Miriam,” said Nick, after a moment’s pause, “think a moment and try to remember something about those two persons you met in the station, or about the car which stood at the station platform there which will assist me in identifying them.”

She brightened visibly.

“I can recall something very definitely,” she said, “and it may seem strange to you that I do recall it. But when I tell you why I do, you will understand me. The thing that I recall is the number that hung over the back of that car when I turned to look at it just as I was entering the waiting room at the station. This was impressed upon me, because it was a number which, for another reason, I have long been familiar with.”

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER'S STRANGE QUEST.

"Wait just a moment before you tell me what the number is," said the detective.

He crossed the room to a small desk which stood open, and, seating himself there, he wrote as follows:

"INSPECTOR JOHN C. PETTUS, Scotland Yard, London.

"Man calling himself Professor Aquilla, hypnotist, gave exhibition of powers in Hampton, Devonshire, three years ago last March. Probably exhibited elsewhere before and afterward. Cable complete information concerning him to date."

Having signed this, Nick carried it down to the street door and called Danny to him from the car.

"Hurry this to the cable office and see that it goes off at once," he said. "Then return here and wait for me."

He went back then to Miriam.

"Now, for the number," he said to her, "and tell me why you remember it, because I want to be positive that you do."

She gave him a slip of paper upon which she had written with dashes between them 17, 15, 13, and she said, in doing so:

"That is the number that the car bore as a license tag, after you eliminate the hyphens I have used. In other words one seventy-one five thirteen. The reason I remember them is this. Up to the time of the death of my mother, we had lived in three different houses in three different villages in England. Those houses were numbered respectively seventeen, fifteen, and thirteen, and I used to ask my mother if the next house we lived in would be numbered eleven, and if she supposed we would keep on moving until we got down to the figure one. I tell you this only to show you how those three numbers were impressed upon my memory, and why, when I caught sight of them at the tail of that strange car, I recognized them instantly, and could not easily forget them."

"Good!" said the detective. "That is splendid. Now, did you see any letters after the numbers?"

"I don't in the least remember that."

"There are always letters after a license number on an automobile," Nick said.

"Yes, I know, but I did not notice as to that."

"But you are quite positive as to these three numbers?"

"I am absolutely certain."

"Miriam," said the detective, changing the form of questioning, "did Mrs. Brayton tell you that she called upon me some time ago—within a short time after the death of Mr. Brayton?"

"No, she did not tell me."

"Had Mrs. Brayton ever said anything to you in regard to your acting strangely at times, just before and immediately after Mr. Brayton's death?"

"Why, no. What do you mean?"

"Have you felt strangely for two or three months past?"

"I am not conscious of such a thing."

"Think a moment. At any time when you have been walking along the road out there in the country, have you been startled by supposing that some one was calling to you."

"Oh, yes, that occurs to me frequently."

"Tell me how it occurs to you."

"Why, it is merely the idea that some one is near to me."

"Is it the idea that some one speaks to you, or calls to you, or is it merely the feeling of a human presence near at hand?"

"I should say that it is rather the impression that some one was calling me by name, Mr. Carter."

"As if some one said 'Miriam' suddenly, with a rising reflection, like I do now?" and he called her name aloud and sharply.

"Yes—only I am not conscious of hearing any sound."

"You have attributed such occasions to your imagination, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Have there been any lapses of memory in connection with those occasions?"

"I do not think so. I am not certain as to that."

The detective left his chair and secured his hat.

"I am going to leave you now, Miriam," he said, "but I want you not to retire to your bed until a Miss Ida Jones, whom I shall send to you, arrives."

"Who is she, pray?" Miriam asked, rising also and smiling.

"She is one of my assistants, Miriam, and will be a splendid friend to you as well as a very agreeable acquaintance. I want you to keep her with you every moment of time—sleeping and waking—until I shall have determined that it is no longer necessary."

"But why?"

"Because—I do not want to frighten you, and you must not be startled by what I shall say now—it is quite evident to me that you have been subjected to the same hypnotic influence that controlled you at the time that operation was performed, in England, and I want Ida Jones with you from this time on in order to prevent repetition of it."

"But do you really think there is any such danger?"

"I am quite convinced of it, Miriam."

She nodded. Then she smiled up at him, although there were tears glistening in her eyes as she said:

"I shall be very glad of a companion with me just now, Mr. Carter, and more particularly of any one who comes with your recommendation. I must admit to you that I am terribly upset by the sudden death of my benefactress, following so closely upon the death of Mr. Brayton, whom I had learned to love as a father. I will gladly do as you say."

Nick had himself driven at once to his own house, where he summoned Ida Jones to the reception room.

"Ida," he said, "I have just come from the Brayton home, on Riverside Drive. Miriam Archer is there awaiting you, and I want you to go to her at once. I am convinced that she is a hypnotic subject, and is directly under the influence of a man whom I already have taken measures to find. But I want you to guard her every moment, to watch her carefully, to sleep in the same bed with her, and not to permit her to be for a moment out of your sight under any circumstances until I tell you that the necessity of this watchful care is past."

"I understand you," said Ida.

"While you are watching her, I want you also to study her, and if at any time you should see any evidence of such an influence falling upon her, despite your presence, don't do anything to interrupt it. Let it take its course, but watch her. And if she should rise to go anywhere—to leave the room or the house, follow her and observe closely."

"I will go at once," said Ida.

"You may take the car at the door. Danny will drive you there. That's all. Good night."

It was after ten o'clock, but it was not too late for Nick Carter to find out one thing which he wished to know about before he retired.

He hastened into the street and into the subway. When he left the train he walked several blocks rapidly through the rain and mist, finally ringing the doorbell of a reputable physician, who was also a great hypnotist.

The doctor himself replied to the summons, for it happened that he was entertaining guests that evening, and had been passing through the hallway when the bell rang. He and Nick Carter were old friends, and the greeting between them was cordial.

"I want to talk with you about five minutes," the detective said. "Can you spare me that much time?"

"Gladly, if I can be of any service to you, Carter," was the instant reply, and the physician led the way into his private office.

"I want to know something about hypnosis," said the detective, accepting the proffered chair and facing the doctor, who had seated himself upon the swivel chair at his desk.

"Something about hypnosis?" the doctor laughed. "I have had the degree of M. D. attached to my name more than twenty years now, Carter. I have studied hypnosis ever since that time; but I must tell you that I still know mighty little about it."

"But you know more about it than anybody else."

"I believe the public has been good enough to say as much—yes."

"I think you are quite competent to answer the questions I want to ask you," said Nick.

"Go ahead."

"Suppose a young girl at the age of—of—we will say fourteen—should be brought to you to have a slight surgical operation performed—let us say for the removal of her tonsils—could you subject her to that operation without pain to herself by using hypnosis instead of ether?"

"Assuredly."

"Would you retain your influence gained over her in that manner, afterward?"

"That would depend."

"Depend upon what?"

"It would depend upon whether it was my intention to do so when I first gained that influence."

"Oh, I see. You mean, do you not, that in order to preserve and continue the influence that you would thus acquire over her, it would be necessary that you should have that desire in mind at the time you first subjected her to the hypnotic influence?"

"More than that would be necessary, Carter."

"What more?"

"It would be absolutely necessary not only that I should have that wish and should impress it upon her while she was under my hypnotic influence, but also that I should distinctly communicate it to her in the form of a command."

"Tell me how."

"Well, this way: If the girl were here now, such a girl as you describe, and was seated in that chair where you are, I would take this bit of crystal—or a silver quarter out of my pocket would perform the service just as well—anything that would for the moment rivet her attention—and hold it before her eyes while I commanded her to sink into the hypnotic sleep. When a person is in a hypnotic sleep, Carter, the operator, or hypnotist, as you would call him, deals with what we call the subconsciousness of the subject and not with the direct conscious entity. The subconscious activity of any individual is the true activity. It is the depth and power behind every act in that individual's life, while the apparent consciousness is only the surface indication. When you look out upon a lake of water and see waves chasing themselves across it, you are viewing only the surface indication; it is the depth beneath those waves which give the power, the stability to it."

"Go on, doctor."

"Now, if that girl were in the chair there, and I had determined to render her a subject to my hypnotic influence at any time I chose to command it, I would give that order directly to her subconsciousness while she was here under my control."

"And that would settle it?"

"That would settle it."

"Do you mean to tell me that at a distance you could compel her to your will after that?"

"At any distance—however great."

"Thank you, doctor. Can I have five minutes more of your time?"

"Fifty if you want it, Carter. My guests are very well entertained."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNCANNY SUGGESTION.

"The point is this, doctor," said the detective, after considering a moment: "I have not been giving you a hypothetical case, but have been reciting an actual one."

"I assumed as much," replied the doctor, smiling.

"The young woman to whom I have referred is now well along in her eighteenth year. It is rather more than three years since she went to a surgeon in a little village named Hampton, in England, to undergo an operation for the removal of her tonsils and certain growths in her throat. She objected to taking ether. There was a traveling hypnotist in the village to whom, at the suggestion of the surgeon, she subjected herself, and the operation was performed by that means.

"Now, doctor, developments that have taken place since that time in the history of that girl and others associated with her, lead me to the supposition that it is possible that the hypnotist visited her village with the intention of making a hypnotic subject of this girl who was then between fourteen and fifteen years of age. Fate threw her directly into his hands. I feel assured from what I know now that even if the hypnotist did not visit that village with the intention of subjecting this girl to his powers, he was approached while there by others with that object in view. I am convinced by what you have just told me that he made use of the powers of suggestion to render her continually subject to his will since then, and I believe that he has exercised his powers over her several times."

"Very likely," said the doctor.

"Do you assure me that he could do that?" Nick asked.

"Most certainly."

"Would it be necessary for him to come into contact with her in order to exercise his powers thoroughly?"

"It would be necessary for him to come into contact with her to exercise those powers thoroughly—yes; but to influence her mind or her will or to direct her thought——"

"I mean," Nick interrupted, "to influence her to the extent of making her forget."

"Please be more explicit, Carter."

"The young woman arrived in the city late this afternoon from a place in New Jersey. She was driven from the house where she was staying to a railway station, and she went into the waiting room to wait for the train. In the waiting room there were two persons. These began to talk with her, and now she cannot tell me positively whether she came to the city by that train or in an automobile, which was standing at the platform of the station at the time. Two or three hours more than was necessary were consumed by her in the journey to her destination in this city, and she cannot tell me why she was so late."

"What is her first positive recollection?" the doctor asked.

"Of walking out of the Pennsylvania Station with other passengers and calling a taxicab to drive her to the house where she was bound."

"Now, Carter, just what is it that you want to know about this?"

"I wish to know positively, if possible, if this girl could have been influenced to the extent that I have described by the hypnotist. In other words, I want to know whether he would have to be near her in order to accomplish the amount of control which I suspect he had over her."

"I should say that it would be necessary," the doctor replied slowly and with emphasis. "Of course, there might be an extreme case where it would not be necessary."

"What do you mean by an extreme case?"

"I mean that the hypnotist might possess unusual powers, and that the subject—that is the girl—might be extraordinarily responsive to him."

"Well?" said Nick.

"Even in that case," the doctor replied, "it would seem to me that one of the parties you describe as having been in the waiting room with the young woman was, beyond doubt, the hypnotist."

"Thank you. That is just what I wished to know."

"Is there anything more, Carter?"

"Yes, I want to know how I can overcome the influence that is upon her."

"I doubt very much if you can do that."

"Suppose I should bring her to you, doctor?"

"That might answer; but I would not advise it."

"Why not?"

"You would be subjecting her to two influences, and it might not be well for her physical well-being. It might distress her mentally. I should not advise it."

"Have you any suggestion to make in the matter?"

"If you will be more explicit and tell me what is sought to be accomplished by these designs against the girl, perhaps I might suggest something."

"I can do that in general terms, doctor, although I am not well enough informed myself to particularize."

"Very well, let us have the general terms, then."

"Perhaps you saw in the papers this evening accounts of the sudden death of Mrs. John Brayton. She was found dead in her automobile in front of her own door on Riverside Drive by the chauffeur, who had got down from his seat to assist her in alighting."

"Yes, I read the slight account of it. What has that to do with the matters we are discussing?"

"The young woman whom I have been describing to you is Miriam Archer, the adopted daughter of Mrs. Brayton. She was taken into the family some time ago. I am convinced now that she was sent to that family by the force of this hypnotic influence. It has already been established that it was the design of a party of conspirators to place her in that household in such a way that she might become heiress to John Brayton's wealth, after which they doubtless had some plans of depriving her of it and securing it for themselves. I have never discovered what those plans were, but that they existed there can be no doubt."

"I understand you, Carter. But did I not see an account of the death of John Brayton himself recently?"

"Yes, he has been dead only a short time. His wife came to consult me about it only a few days ago. She was unqualifiedly of the opinion that her husband did not die a natural death, but had been forced out of existence by these same conspirators who began their game by murdering Brayton's nephew and by introducing this girl into his family."

"Rather a remarkable circumstance, isn't it, Carter?"

"It is remarkable all the way through, doctor."

"Well, what is the status of the case now?"

"Well, in some manner this hypnotist is exercising his powers for evil and has forced John Brayton and his wife to the grave in order that this girl might inherit. Already there is sufficient proof of his power over the girl herself. To-night she is the heiress of the Brayton fortune. It is doubtful if she can come into full possession of it until she is of age, although I am not positive as to that. But, in any event, it is apparent that the Brayton wealth is the ultimate goal of this hypnotist, whether he is working alone now that his former coconspirators are in prison, or if he has since engaged others to coöperate with him in their places."

"And you want me to suggest something?"

"Yes, doctor. Whenever I have been up against a proposition where my own knowledge did not go deep enough, I have sought out an expert in that particular branch of knowledge—an expert who could direct me and consult with me. That is why I have come to you now. I will confess that the practice of hypnotism is a branch of knowledge with which I have had little to do."

The doctor sat silent for several moments, thinking deeply. When he spoke, it was with a quiet firmness.

"I should say this, then, Carter: Do not seek to withdraw the girl entirely from the influence of this unknown hypnotist. Rather let her be subjected to his influence, if possible, but keep her, in the meantime, directly under the eye of some person in whom you can thoroughly trust, or, better still, directly under your own observation."

"I have already arranged for that, doctor."

"You must understand, Carter, that days, weeks, or even months may pass before the hypnotist will again seek to exercise his powers. There may be no occasion for him to do so. Therefore, if you begin this watchful care over the subject, you must not permit it to relax for a moment."

"I am quite convinced of that."

"If you had a woman now upon whom you could thoroughly depend——" the doctor began, when Nick interrupted him.

"I have just such a person, doctor. She is already in the house with Miss Archer."

"Then I don't see how my advice can go farther than that."

"No; but there is one more thing about which I would like to ask you."

"Well?"

"Is there any means by which this hypnotist could have brought about those two deaths, or either of them?"

"That is extremely doubtful."

"But you do not say that it is positively impossible."

"No; although it is probably so."

"Doctor," the detective said, bending nearer to his friend, "it is the intention of the physicians to perform an autopsy upon the body of Mrs. Brayton early to-morrow morning. I believe there could be no objection to your presence on that occasion, and I should be glad to have you there to represent me."

"I will go if you wish it."

"Very well, then, I do. You know where the house is on Riverside Drive?"

"Yes."

"And I may count upon you?"

"You may."

"Then I think I will not keep you from your guests any longer to-night."

"All right, Carter. Bear in mind the fact that you may call upon me at any moment you desire for further assistance."

CHAPTER IX.

CRIME BY SUGGESTION.

It is not generally known that throughout the British Isles the detectives employed by Scotland Yard and its branches keep a close surveillance over those persons who are grouped under the head of "charlatans."

A charlatan may be an itinerant player, a wandering musician, a roving mountebank, a knife thrower, a saber slasher—in short, he may resort to any ostensible calling to hide his real one, which is that of preying upon his fellow men—a calling which will permit him to rove from town to town and village to village.

This explains why Nick Carter sent the cable message to his friend, who was one of the inspectors at Scotland Yard.

He knew perfectly well that, unless the visit made by the hypnotist, who called himself Professor Aquilla, of Hampton, at the time described, had been the only venture that the man had made in that line of giving exhibitions, his name and all the information that could be gleaned concerning him would have been duly entered upon the book of charlatans at Scotland Yard, where the records of all such people are religiously kept; and he felt assured that Inspector Pettus would not be long in securing and forwarding the desired information.

But the detective wasted no time in waiting for this information. He knew of the intended autopsy upon the body of Mrs. Brayton, and he was at the house where it was to be performed, at the appointed time.

Not being a physician, he did not seek to enter the room where the autopsy was held. He had no desire to be there, although he did wish incident information concerning the cause of her death; and it was because he had somehow doubted that he would receive this information in its exact form that he had induced his friend, the celebrated physician, to be present also.

While Nick waited, he sent Simmons to tell Ida that he was there, and she entered the room presently, accompanied by Miriam.

It was Miriam who spoke first. She advanced across it quickly, extending both her hands in greeting to the detective. She was in deep mourning, and her pale face showed how greatly she had suffered over the death of her best friend.

"I am glad that you have come, Mr. Carter," she said, in her simple, direct way, "and I am glad also that you sent Miss Jones to me. We have already become very fond of each other. You know you said enough to me while you were here yesterday to make me quite fully aware why you deemed it best to have Miss Jones with me. I want you to know that I thoroughly approve of it, and that, while I am not conscious of any reason why I should be watched, the strange things that occurred to me yesterday and my loss of memory concerning the journey from Brayton Braes convince me that you have done wisely. I want to assure you, in her presence, that I shall not seek for one moment to escape her observation. That is why I followed her to this room just now. If you wish to talk together in confidence, don't hesitate to go over there in the bay window and do so. I shall not be in the least offended."

"We can talk in your presence just as well, Miriam," the detective replied.

"As you please," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

The detective turned to Ida Jones.

"Well," he said, "have you anything to report?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"Have you observed anything that you regard as worthy of mention along the lines that I talked about when I sent you here?"

"Nothing at all."

"Did you two occupy the same room last night?"

"Yes—and the same bed."

The detective turned suddenly to Miriam again.

"Have you noticed, at any time since the death of Mr. Brayton, that Mrs. Brayton was feeling ill, or have you heard her complain about anything at all that troubled her physically?" he asked.

"Only of her head," Miriam replied.

"What did she say about that to you?"

"She spoke to me several times about a certain kind of numbness in the right side of her head."

"When did she first speak of that?"

"I think it was the day of the funeral of Mr. Brayton."

"Did you hear her refer to it before that time?"

"No, I never did."

"Since then how often did you hear her speak of it?"

"Every day, I think; and sometimes two or three times a day."

"Did she call it a headache?"

"No; the nearest she came to giving me a description of it was once when she said that it was not like dizziness, and yet it was—if you can understand that. I could not."

"Are you aware, Miriam, that all of this wealth belongs to you, and soon will be entirely under your control?" the detective asked, with a sudden change of the subject.

"Yes," she replied. "I know all about it. Mr. Brayton told me of everything that he intended to do. But I am under promise to say no more to any person than that I am his heiress until the will shall have been probated and its contents made known to the public. But I can assure you, Mr. Carter, that everything is so arranged that if anything should happen to me now, no designing persons and no company of such people could get one cent's value of the property into their possession. Mr. Brayton was thoroughly convinced of the truth of the plot against him—the plot to which I was made an innocent party—and you will find that he provided in the document for every emergency."

There was no time for further discussion regarding this point, for at that moment the door opened and Nick's friend, the doctor, entered the room, and drew him into the bay window.

"Have they finished with the autopsy?" the detective asked, as soon as they were alone together.

"No—that is, they are not prepared yet to make a report and are not likely to be for some time to come. But I have seen all I care to."

"You were satisfied then, doctor?"

"No, I am entirely unsatisfied. But I am convinced."

"Convinced of what?"

"I am convinced of the true reason for Mrs. Brayton's sudden death while riding in her automobile."

"Well, doctor, that is what I am here to find out. What was it?"

"She died, Carter—and in making this statement I hope you will not misunderstand me, nor think that I am facetious—for want of breath. I mean that she died because she could not breathe. More than that, she could not breathe because she had been commanded not to do so."

"Hypnotism!" exclaimed Nick sharply.

"Yes, Carter, hypnotism. To my mind no bullet ever took a life more certainly. No dagger ever pierced a heart more surely and with more deadly effect than the hypnotic suggestion exercised over Mrs. Brayton. It is as certain as that you are standing here beside me, but I doubt if you would find two physicians in five thousand who would quite agree with me. I can assure you, however, that the report you will get from the men who are now in that other room performing the autopsy will be quite different. But you can go away from here with the positive assurance that I have told you the truth. Mrs. Brayton was murdered; and she was murdered by suggestion."

"It is horrible!" exclaimed Nick. "The mere thought of it is awful."

"It certainly is, Carter."

"Did you believe before this experience that it could be done?"

"I knew that it could be done, as well as we can know anything that we have not done ourselves or seen done."

"Doctor," said Nick quickly, "if I should catch this fellow, is there any way of proving this awful crime against him?"

The doctor was silent a moment before he answered. Then he said slowly:

"When you have caught him, Carter, send for me and take me to him. I will match my skill against his, and if I can win in the strange duel that we will fight in your presence, you shall have your proof."

Without a reply in words, the detective thrust out his right hand and grasped the doctor's; then, after a brief word of farewell, they left the house together, parting on the doorstep, Nick to return to his own home.

Two hours later, while seated in his study, the answer to Nick's cable message arrived. It was as follows:

"Aquilla a charlatan. Right name Patrick Casey. Irish and French parentage. Forty-two years old. Born Dublin. Arrested many times in all parts of the kingdom. Never convicted. Petty crimes and misdemeanors. Has been mountebank, showman, and once practiced saber swinging in the streets of Greenwich. Began giving hypnotic exhibitions four years ago, after unexplained absence of two years from our knowledge. Either a most proficient faker, or an expert at the craft; probably latter. Suspected of levying blackmail through practice of hypnotic powers. Favorite victims girls and young women, also young matrons. Last arrested in Manchester. Upon acquittal, left this country for New York. Am forwarding photographs and more complete record by mail. Had one known pal somewhere in America by name Benjamin Battle, former cracksman. PETTUS."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE TOILS.

Ida Jones, who had served the detective as assistant for a long time, possessed one quality which renders her invaluable in certain classes of detective work, and this quality is the one of construing her orders literally. Therefore, when she was told to keep her eyes upon Miriam, and not to permit the object of her scrutiny to be out of her presence for a moment, Ida was determined to carry this order out as literally as was her habit concerning all orders.

The night following the incidents related in the preceding chapter—the second one after the death of Mrs. Brayton—found Ida and Miriam at ten o'clock in the evening seated together in the parlor of Miriam's suite of rooms in the Riverside Drive house.

Miriam had been silent for a considerable time, and as it was not Ida's policy to keep her in conversation, the woman detective had been watching her charge furtively, wondering if there could be any real truth in Nick Carter's idea of the hypnotic influence that was exerted over her.

Presently Miriam, with a characteristic shake of her shoulders, arose and crossed the room until she stood before a long mirror, where she bent forward and studied her own face with the closest kind of scrutiny. She kept this up for so long a time that Ida had begun to wonder concerning the cause of it, when Miriam turned about and approached her.

"Ida," she said, "I want to ask you some very direct questions."

"Yes, Miriam," was the reply. "What are they?"

"Mr. Carter believes, does he not, that I am under the hypnotic influence of that man who assisted at the surgical operation in Hampton so long ago."

"Yes, that is his belief," Ida replied.

"Also, he is of the opinion that the man can influence me from a distance."

"He believes it to be possible."

"And he has sent you here to watch over me on that account."

"Yes."

"Have you studied me closely since you have been with me?"

"I have. I have watched you almost every moment."

"Have you seen any evidence of the existence of that influence upon me?"

"No."

"You know, do you not, that I am very anxious to help you both in this matter?"

"I think we both realize that; yes."

"Will you look at my face very closely now, particularly at my eyes?"

"I am doing so."

"Do you notice any difference in them?"

"Not particularly."

"Not at all?"

"Perhaps."

"What difference, and where do you see it?"

"I should say if there is a difference it is in the expression of your eyes."

"Were you wondering just now why I crossed the room and studied my face in the mirror?"

"Yes."

"It was because I felt that strange pressure in my face which I recognize as the first symptom of that strange influence."

"I am glad that you told me about it, Miriam."

"There is more, Ida."

"Well?"

"Before now I have felt the same symptoms, and have known nothing at all about what they were or what induced them. I have gone to the mirror and studied my face and eyes carefully. I have noticed at such times that the pupils of my eyes were greatly dilated. Do you see that they are so now?"

"Yes."

"What time is it, Ida?"

"A little after ten o'clock."

"Shall I tell you what it is that makes me imagine that the uncanny influence is upon me?"

"Please do."

"It is because that, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, I feel an almost uncontrollable desire to go out."

"To go out of the house, do you mean?"

"Yes—out upon the street."

"With any definite object in view?"

"No, I seem to have no object other than merely to go out of the house."

"If I were not here, would you be likely to give way to that idea?"

"I don't know. I would not if I could control it."

"Ida Jones was thoughtful for a moment, drumming her foot upon the log while she considered this circumstance from every viewpoint."

Here was precisely a situation that Nick Carter had foreseen, only it had come up in a much more advantageous manner than the detective had anticipated, because his idea had been that it would be necessary to watch Miriam surreptitiously, while now Miriam was herself making the suggestion that she be watched.

In Ida's opinion it was too good an opportunity to let slip, and she came to a decision very quickly.

"Miriam," she asked, "how courageous are you?"

"I don't know what you mean, Ida."

"Would you be afraid to go out on the street alone now?"

"Not exactly afraid, but I would be reluctant to do so."

"Will you take a suggestion from me, and, in doing so, put yourself entirely in my hands, depending upon me utterly to watch you, to guard you and protect you, no matter what may happen?"

"Yes; only I don't know just what you mean."

"I am going to ask you to sit down in that chair over there and close your eyes and to give up to this influence that is exerting itself over you. I am going to ask you to make yourself as passive as possible, and to avoid all efforts to repel that influence. Will you do that and trust to me in doing so?"

"If you think it best, I will."

"I do think so."

Without another word, Miriam crossed the room to the chair that Ida had indicated and seated herself upon it; then, at the direction of Ida, she turned so that only the profile of her face was visible to the woman detective.

"Now close your eyes and relax your body," said Ida, "and try not to resist any impulse that may come to you. Trust to me if you should find the desire to leave the house uncontrollable. Follow it, for I am convinced that you are much too valuable an asset to be placed in any personal danger to yourself."

"Very well," Miriam replied.

For several moments after that, while Ida watched over her charge, there was apparently no change. Gradually, however, it was noticeable that Miriam's breathing became deeper and more regular, as is the case of one who is asleep. It was ten minutes, perhaps, after the experiment was begun when Miriam arose slowly from her chair and looked straight toward Ida, and then from place to place around the room, but with an expression in her eye that was suggestive of not being conscious of what she observed.

She stood in that manner for a moment before the chair upon which she had been seated, then, as if with sudden decision, she crossed the room hurriedly toward the door to her dressing room and passed through it, Ida following her closely.

Miriam went to a closet and took therefrom her hat and wraps. She found her glove box and selected a pair of gloves, which she slowly drew upon her fingers with the same deliberation she might ordinarily have employed.

Meantime Ida was busy, too. She also was preparing for the street, and had adjusted her own hat, wraps, and gloves.

Miriam now seemed to be thoroughly conscious of the presence of her companion. She looked toward Ida occasionally, but, apparently, without seeing her, and, quite evidently, it did not occur to the hypnotized girl to speak to her.

As soon as Miriam had prepared herself for the street, she went to her jewel box and took therefrom a diamond pendant and a pearl collar, both of which had been presented to her by Mr. Brayton on the occasion of her adoption into the family. From a lower compartment in the jewel case she drew out a roll of bills, which she deliberately counted, laying one bill after another upon the dresser before her. She turned her head from side to side, with wrinkled brows, as if in perplexity.

Ida, who had been watching her count the bills, saw that there were five twenties, five tens, and five dollar bills in the lot, making in all one hundred and seventy-five dollars.

Then Miriam, her face still expressing perplexity, began to search farther into the jewel case, and it occurred to Ida suddenly that the hypnotic subject somehow had found it impossible to carry out exactly the instructions she was receiving. A happy thought occurred to Miss Jones.

Following a sudden impulse, Ida thrust her hand into her own purse, which she had already taken up preparatory to going out, and drew forth a roll of money of her own. Stepping forward, the woman detective laid it upon the dresser beside the other pile of bills that Miriam had counted. Miriam reached forward eagerly, seized the money that Ida had laid there before her, took from it two more ten-dollar bills and another five, and placed this money with the amount that she had already counted.

Thus she had two hundred dollars—undoubtedly the amount that was being impressed upon her as the sum she should take with her before going out.

Miriam now paid no attention to the remainder of Ida's money, but rolled the two hundred dollars together and stuffed it all, together with the diamonds and pearls, into her mesh bag; then, without speaking a word, she turned toward the door, and, without the slightest suggestion of hesitancy, passed from the room into the corridor and continued on to the servants' stairway at the rear of the house. Having descended the stairs, she left the house stealthily by the servants' entrance, with Ida following closely.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ADVENTURE IN THE NIGHT.

Ida Jones would have given much at that moment had there been time and opportunity for her to have made use of a telephone and to have summoned Nick Carter to her, but she realized that this was an occasion where she must act upon her own initiative and be prepared to meet any emergency which might arise.

As if by previous appointment, Miriam crossed to the river side of the drive and turned northward, walking leisurely. She continued on in this manner until she had covered approximately a quarter of a mile, when, as if by previous arrangement, she seated herself upon one of the benches. There she composed herself as if to await the arrival of some person she was expecting.

Ida, during all this time, had kept at a distance, and yet close enough to observe closely.

She was quite conscious of the fact that any person who was awaiting the coming of Miriam would, if that person were wary, observe her and instantly know that Miriam was being followed and watched. But there was no other way for her to do, no other means of accomplishing what she had set out to perform, and she was obliged to take chances in this respect, trusting that the hypnotic operator, who was exerting his influence upon Miriam, would not suppose that a personal guard had been placed over the girl to protect her.

When Miriam seated herself upon the bench Ida selected another one that was not very far removed from it, and she was glad that this opportunity to wait had presented itself, for not only had it obviated the necessity of going farther away from the house, but it gave her a better opportunity to observe closely everything that might happen.

The hour was not so late but what some of the other benches still were occupied by persons who were out for a breath of evening air. For several moments after Ida had seated herself she permitted her eyes to rove from her charge in order that she might study the character of the others who were within her range of vision.

As she looked toward the first of these benches that attracted her attention, the one nearest to Miriam on the other side of her, a man and a woman, who had been seated there, left it and moved slowly toward the bench on which Miriam was seated. Ida, remembering what she had been told concerning the presence of a man and a woman in the railway station near Brayton Braes, instantly came to the conclusion that these were the same persons, and that one of them, the man, was the one who was at that very moment exerting the hypnotic influence upon Miriam.

If Ida had remained seated where she was, merely watching for what might occur, she would not have been able to overhear a word that might pass between the three persons she was now engaged in watching, nor was she close enough to observe more than their general conduct and motions. Therefore, because she had already dared so much, she left her place without hesitation and moved forward as swiftly as she dared toward Miriam, timing herself so that she would arrive at that particular bench within a second or two after the man and the woman she had observed.

Apparently the strangers paid no attention to the woman detective. If they had noticed her presence, or even had suspected that she might be there in the interest of Miriam Archer, there was nothing about their conduct to show it. Accordingly, Ida decided that they were either unaware of her presence or were indifferent about it.

As Ida drew nearer to the scene, she saw the man lean toward Miriam and apparently say something to her. Miriam at once opened the mesh bag she carried, and Ida was near enough to see that she took from it the roll of bills and the jewels and placed them unhesitatingly in the man's hands.

Ida slowed her pace as much as she dared, and walked on so that she passed quite close to them, but said no word when she was near enough to hear them speak. She was compelled to pass on out of hearing, without having learned anything in that manner.

Having gone a little way beyond them, she turned to retrace her steps. She now saw that all three were standing, Miriam having arisen to face the others. The man was bending nearer to her, evidently intent upon what he was saying and doing. That he was making some further hypnotic suggestions to Miriam's subconsciousness, Ida Jones could not doubt.

As soon as that was done, and it occupied less than a minute, Miriam turned squarely about and moved away from them, going toward the house from whence she had come—the house of which she was now the owner.

At the same moment the man and the woman started in the opposite direction, walking rapidly, and for once in Ida Jones' life she was face to face with an emergency where, in order to perform what she considered to be her duty, she must go directly against the orders that had been given to her by Nick Carter. For never in her life had Ida been engaged upon a case where her apparent duty was more plain and so well defined.

Here, in plain sight of the woman detective, but now moving out of sight and rapidly escaping, was the very person whom Nick Carter was using every effort to trail. Here was the arch villain, indeed, of all the plotting that had been going on. Right before Ida's eyes, and moving away from out of her sight, was the living menace to the personal as well as the worldly well-being of Miriam Archer.

If Ida Jones were to obey her orders literally at that moment she must let this man escape. If she chose to act upon her own initiative and permit Miriam to go on toward her home alone and unattended, she might pursue this man and his companion, and she might, at least, find out where they were hiding, and so give Nick Carter the directions he stood in need of in order to make an immediate arrest.

It was a trying moment to Ida Jones—a moment fraught with many emotions, but it passed in an interval so short that none of the parties whom she was considering had walked more than fifty feet before she came to a determination.

With one last glance toward Miriam, feeling as she gave it that there could be no doubt whatever but that her charge would arrive home safely, and recalling the fact that she had put back the catch on the door by which they had come out of the house, so that there would be no difficulty about reëntering it, Ida deliberately turned about, and, forsaking Miriam, she walked rapidly up the drive after the now rapidly retreating figures of the man and the woman.

Ida did not stop to consider whether she had been observed by these people. She was so intent upon what she was doing, so possessed with the thought of the necessity for immediate action in trailing this man and this woman that there were no other considerations in her mind. Continuing on, the woman detective turned into a side street when those she was following did so. This turn was made after the man and woman had proceeded a considerable distance up the drive. After a while Ida saw the two pass through a gateway in a picket fence which stood in front of one of the old frame houses that remained in that particular part of the city as relics of a time that is fast disappearing forever.

The house in question stood by itself upon a space of ground that was as large as six city lots. The front of the building was partly concealed by trees, while shrubs, bushes, and tall grass flourished uncared for in the yard between the two large apartment houses.

The gate was left open invitingly for Ida's entrance. She did not hesitate to walk into the yard after the man and woman, and to step behind a lilac bush, from which she watched closely to see if they indeed entered the house, or if they had made use of its presence there merely as a subterfuge, believing that they might have been followed.

While Ida watched, the man and the woman paused upon the covered veranda in front of the house and conversed together in low tones; then the man left the woman standing there alone while he walked along the piazza to the side of it that was nearest Ida, leaped down to the ground, which was five or six feet below, and hastened around the house until he passed out of sight.

Ida remained where she was, wondering what would happen next, conjecturing that the woman was waiting while the man found some other means of entrance to the building and passed through it from the rear in order to admit his companion.

She was alert, it is true, but alert only in that sense of watching in front of her; she paid no heed to what might be passing behind her.

Nor did it occur to her that she was in danger until she was startled by a sudden movement behind her; then she felt herself seized in a pair of muscular arms which confined her own close to her sides, while a bony hand was placed rudely over her mouth, effectually preventing any outcry that she might seek to make.

CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER'S FORTUNATE IMPULSE.

Following the receipt of the cable message which had come that day from Inspector Pettus, Nick Carter had hurried to police headquarters, where he held an extended interview with the officer in charge of the detective bureau. To this officer he showed the message he had received, and recounted all the circumstances of the case in hand.

"Inspector," he said, in conclusion, "there is no doubt that the man referred to in this message is now in this country, and has been here for some time. We do not in New York City pay sufficient attention to charlatanism and its various branches of trade. It has been our habit to let fortune tellers, palmists, clairvoyants, and quack doctors ply their vocations undisturbed, and I have not known of a circumstance when the police have interfered with the practice of hypnotism."

"You are right about that, Nick," was the reply.

"To my mind there is nothing more dangerous, or which holds more menace in it, than the practice of hypnotic influence without restraint, for there are men living who use it for very unworthy motives."

"There isn't a doubt of that."

"Somewhere, then, in this city this fellow, Aquilla, is living under another name. I know, as well as if I had seen him do it, that he is the one who is responsible for the death of Mrs. Brayton, for the forgetfulness of Miriam Archer during her trip to New York, and, in fact, for all of the unexplained things that have happened."

"I should say that, from your viewpoint, Nick, that goes, without a doubt."

"You keep a partial record of such people here in your office, do you not?"

"Oh, yes, we've got the records so far as we can obtain them. None of them are complete."

"Have you any idea of such a person as I have described to you, inspector?"

"No. There are so many palmists in the city, so many so-called clairvoyants, hypnotists, fortune tellers, and others, that to find this particular person is like looking for a needle in a stack of hay."

"Quite so," said Nick.

"Nevertheless," the inspector continued, "I have one man here in the department who keeps rather good tabs on that sort of thing. He has already made several arrests in that line. He is out just now, but will report for duty before night, and I will question him. If he has any information that is worth while I will call you on the telephone and inform you."

"In the meantime," said the detective, "I might look over the lists that you have, if you will give them to me."

And so Nick was conducted into another room at headquarters, where the inspector waved his hands toward some books upon a shelf in a huge safe, as he said:

"The records are there, Nick, and you know as well how to find what you want as I do, so go ahead and take your own time for it."

It was an hour later when the detective came away from headquarters and returned to his own home. He carried with him, on a slip of paper, three names and addresses which he had jotted down. He had done this from impulse and intuition, rather than because of any definite idea that he had received from an examination of the records.

Arrived at his house, he looked the names over, thought about them for a while, and, with the thought that it was a toss-up after all as to which one of the three might be the correct one, he tore the slip of paper into three pieces, folded them separately, so that they were exactly alike, then he tossed them into his hat, and rang the bell for Joseph.

When the butler entered the room, Nick, with a smile, said to him:

"Joseph, in my hat upon that table are three folded slips of paper. I want you to give just one of them to me now."

Joseph, who never permitted himself to be surprised at anything, and who flattered himself upon the immobility of his features, nevertheless was surprised; but he stepped forward, selected one of the slips of paper, and, with the dignity of one who was passing a legal document to his superior, he placed the slip of paper in the detective's hand.

Nick, with a smile, opened the paper, and read thereon a name and an address that was located in a street far toward the river in the west one hundred and fifties.

A little later the detective boarded a subway train, which he left at the station nearest the address he sought. Presently he was ringing the doorbell of the house to which, some hours later on that same night, Ida Jones was destined to follow the man and the woman she had seen in the presence of Miriam in Riverside Drive.

But there was no answer to his summons at the door, nor was there anything about the house to indicate that it was occupied. The shutters were closed, so that he could not determine whether the house was furnished. While he stood there deliberating, a boy, who was passing along the street, and who had stopped to observe him, shouted, from the gateway:

"Hey, mister, there don't anybody live in that house."

The detective turned about and walked along the path to the front gate, and passed out upon the street.

"Are you quite sure of that, my lad?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know that nobody lives there?"

"Because I saw them move away."

"How long ago?"

"Two weeks, I guess, mister."

"And has the house been closed since that time?"

"Yes, sir. I live right across the street, and I would know if anybody lives there. Nobody lives there now."

Satisfied that this information was correct, the detective, with a shrug of his shoulders, returned to the subway and proceeded to his home. He did not leave his house again until evening, for he felt satisfied that there was nothing for him to do but wait until he should receive from Inspector Pettus the letter containing the pictures and the further information promised about the hypnotist, Aquilla.

After dinner that night, Nick Carter repaired to his study and composed himself to read, selecting a book that already had interested him. In that manner more than two hours passed while he was engrossed in the book he was reading.

Chancing to raise his eyes to the clock on the mantel, and noticing that it lacked only a few minutes of ten, he laid aside the book, and was throwing up his arms in the gesture of one who is weary.

"I wonder what Ida and Miriam are doing now?" he muttered. "It seems to me that something ought to be discovered right there, for I do not believe that the man who exerts his power over the mind of Miriam can refrain from making use of his acquirement very long at a time, now that he undoubtedly is located somewhere near her."

He was tired of reading, weary of inactivity, and he took his hat and went out upon the street, merely nodding to Joseph as he passed. He then started out for one of those long walks which he delighted in taking when the opportunity offered itself.

But he had not gone far when he regretted not having telephoned to Ida Jones before he left the house. Following upon this thought came the impulse to visit the Brayton home, in Riverside Drive. He ran down the steps into a subway entrance that was near him, boarded a train and sped northward.

The consequence of this was that when Ida Jones and Miriam Archer came out of the house, Nick Carter was standing upon the opposite side of the drive watching the building, undetermined in his mind whether or not to ring the bell at that late hour.

To say that he was surprised to see Miriam and Ida come around the house from the servants' entrance, which was on the side of it and on the street, would be to express it mildly, but he instantly formed the correct conclusion concerning it, for it was for this very purpose that he had detailed Ida to her present duty.

He had no idea of making his presence known to either of them. Nevertheless, he was glad that he was upon the ground and in a position to see anything that might occur.

He was quick to infer that Miriam had fallen under the influence of the hypnotist, possibly at the suggestion of Ida, and that the latter was following her in pursuit of her duty.

He saw and smiled as he observed Ida's hesitation when she debated in her mind, during that short interval of uncertainty, whether she should return home with Miriam or should follow the two persons who had enticed the girl from the house by such surreptitious and uncanny methods.

He was pleased when Ida decided as she did, and he was more than pleased that he was there also to follow and to protect his woman assistant, for it never occurred to Nick Carter to doubt that the sagacity and cunning of the hypnotist and his companion would make them fully aware of the fact that they were spied upon. And, being aware of it, they would not hesitate to resort to extreme measures to overcome any consequence of such a thing, and, while Nick did not anticipate that they would do violence to Ida, without being driven to the last extremity, he did not doubt that they would seek by some means to prevent her from doing mischief to their plans and plots.

And so, when Ida stepped into the yard and hid herself behind the lilac bush, Nick Carter also glided into the inclosure behind the picket fence and concealed himself back of another bush. It was not without a sense of pleasurable surprise that he noticed that the house was the same at which he called that afternoon in pursuit of the hypnotist.

And so it was that when Ida Jones felt the grasp of the two strong arms upon her, and felt herself sinking into the power of the man who had seized her, when she realized the presence of the bony hand across her lips preventing any outcry, Nick Carter stood not twenty feet away, watching every move that was made, but still hesitating to spring forward, because, being fully aware that Ida could be in no immediate danger, since he was there to protect her, he desired to wait a little time and see to just what length these two persons would dare to go in making a captive of her.

When the man who had seized upon Ida and held her in his grasp finally lifted her in his strong arms, and carried her up the steps of the piazza and through the doorway, which the woman had already opened, Nick Carter permitted him to go forward, and even allowed them to close the door.

Then, however, without an instant's hesitation, he dashed toward the rear of the building.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE POWER.

Nick Carter always carried his electric torch with him. With it he was enabled to find his way very quickly through the house. The persons who had entered the building, bearing Ida Jones, had believed that there was no necessity for extraordinary caution. They made noise enough to guide the detective directly to the room to which they had taken her.

It was the dining room of the house, with windows upon the side of it that would have opened directly upon the blank wall of one of the great apartment buildings. But now the windows were tightly closed and shuttered, so that not a ray of light from the lamp on the table could escape.

These two had not even thought it necessary to close the door to the room they had entered. They were in the room with the light while Nick stood in the hallway in utter darkness, and thus able to see without being seen.

Nick was rather surprised when he saw that Ida had ceased to struggle, and he had to confess himself amazed when, after they had deposited her on a chair, she sat quite still, with closed eyes. Nick Carter saw that this remarkable hypnotist had succeeded in exerting his influence over her and had put her into a hypnotic sleep.

No word was spoken in that room until the hypnotist stepped forward, standing directly over Ida. After making a few passes with his hands, he said, in a low tone:

"I command you to listen to me, and to obey the suggestions I shall make to you."

He waited a moment, as if to permit his words to have due effect, then he said:

"You are to return directly to the house in Riverside Drive, and to the room you occupied with Miriam Archer. You are to put away the several articles of street attire you are wearing, and will seat yourself upon the chair you occupied before you left that house. You are to forget that you left it at all, and if any slight recollection of it occurs to you, you are to consider it a dream and you are to believe that you were also partly influenced by the control that you observed when it was beginning to have its effect upon Miriam Archer."

Again he paused; then, with a nod toward his woman companion, he said to her:

"Wait here until I take this girl to the gate. She will not wake up until she is back in the room with Miriam."

Nick, knowing that the man would return, permitted him to go outside with Ida, but a moment later, the detective also stepped out upon the porch and down into the yard. There he waited for a moment behind the same lilac bush which had concealed Ida.

When the hypnotist returned from the gate, it was his turn to find himself seized by a pair of strong arms and to feel the force of Nick Carter's fist, as it came into violent contact with his jaw. He fell unconscious.

It required only a moment for Nick Carter to slip steel bracelets upon the wrists of his prisoner, behind his back, and upon his ankles also. The detective then left the fellow lying upon the ground by the lilac bush, and hastened back into the house with rapid steps.

"Madam," he said sharply, entering the room where the woman was waiting, and frightening her so that she cowered backward into a corner, "you will come with me."

Then he stepped forward, seized her by the wrists, drew her hands together behind her, and tied them there with his handkerchief.

"Now, walk ahead of me and out of the house," he said. "I warn you to make no effort to escape."

The woman was either too frightened or too sullen to speak. She obeyed him in silence.

A fortunate circumstance was that a roundsman of the police force happened to be passing the house at the moment when Nick Carter left. Nick called to the uniformed guardian of the law, explained quickly who he was, and sent him to the nearest telephone to order a taxicab without delay.

The consequence of this was that a few moments later Nick Carter, with his two prisoners, and with the roundsman also, for the latter had telephoned to his station for the necessary permission to be absent from his post for a time, was being driven rapidly through the city toward the residence of that celebrated physician whom he had consulted concerning the science of hypnosis, twenty-six hours earlier.

The doctor was in bed when Nick Carter rang the bell, but as soon as he was informed who it was who desired to see him, he lost no time in coming down to his office on the ground floor.

The hypnotist had recovered consciousness during the drive downtown, but he still was dazed, and apparently uncertain as to just what had happened. The woman was glaring sullenly from one face to another. She had not attempted to utter a word after Nick Carter had made her a prisoner.

"Doctor," said Nick, "you can have that duel of wits right now, for this man is the hypnotist. To-night I have caught him in the act of plying his vocation. But I require more than I have seen to prove all that I personally know against him. It's up to you, doctor. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes," was the quick and certain reply.

"Go ahead."

"The great physician stepped in front of the hypnotist and glared down upon him, bending forward and narrowing his eyes until his gaze was centered upon the face of the prisoner.

Suddenly the physician shot his hands forward and pressed his thumbs forcibly against the middle of the prisoner's forehead.

"Sleep!" he commanded.

Nick Carter, observing closely, could see that the man struggled with all his might to keep his eyes from closing, but the lids seemed as if weighted with lead, and again the doctor cried out:

"Sleep! sleep! sleep!"

The lids of the prisoner closed tightly, the muscles relaxed, and he was subjected to the will of the greater intelligence.

The doctor turned and smilingly faced the detective.

"What next?" he asked.

"What can you do now?" questioned Nick.

"Anything with this man that you desire, Carter."

"Can you make him give us a history of all that he has done in relation to his plots against the Braytons and against Miriam Archer during the last four weeks?"

"I think I can."

"Can you make him recite it in words?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"Do that, then."

The doctor again fixed his gaze upon the face of the now sleeping man, made a few passes over him, and said in a low tone:

"Tell me your name."

"Patrick Casey," was the instant reply, spoken in an uncertain voice.

"You are a professional hypnotist?"

"Yes."

"Under what name have you practiced that calling?"

"Professor Aquilla."

"Have you practiced it in this country?"

"No."

"Where?"

"In Great Britain."

"What has been your occupation here?"

"Palmist and clairvoyant."

"Where were you living four weeks ago to-night?"

"In a cabin in the country—near a lake."

"Whose cabin?"

"Brayton's."

"Now, wait a moment, without changing your thought."

The doctor then turned to the detective.

"Am I proceeding as you would have me do, Carter?" he asked.

"Yes, doctor. Go right ahead with that form of questioning. Remember, in asking your questions, that I charge this man with having, by his hypnotic powers, endangered the health of John Brayton so that the man died because of what had been done to him. Also that I charge him with having directly caused the death of Brayton's wife, who died in her car at the door of her own house on Riverside Drive. Remember also that I charge him with exercising his hypnotic powers over Miriam Archer to the end that he may obtain possession of the fortune which she is to inherit from the Braytons. Now go on."

The doctor turned again to his hypnotic victim.

"Go back to this night four weeks ago. Answer my questions truthfully and directly, and in as few words as possible. Now, you are in the cabin by the lake. Where is Brayton?"

"At his home—half a mile away."

"At Brayton Braes?"

"Yes."

"Is anything the matter with him?"

"He is ill."

"What made him ill?"

"I did."

"How?"

"By suggestion—through hypnotic influence."

"By suggestion of what?"

"Impeded circulation of the blood, and paralysis."

"How long has he been ill?"

"Some time."

"How did you first secure this influence over him?"

"By watching for him in the grounds about his house and coming upon him suddenly when he did not suspect that any one was near."

"Was he a good subject?"

"Excellent."

"Did you actually kill him?"

"No; I am innocent of that."

"Why, then, did he die?"

"Because he believed that he could not live. My influence over him so affected his nervous system that the belief in his physical condition bcame certainty. He died from perfectly natural causes which were induced by my hypnotic suggestions."

"Where is Mrs. Brayton, his wife?"

"She is also dead."

"What did she die of?"

"She died from hypnotic suggestion, at my command."

"How did you bring it about?"

"By riding beside her in the automobile—by reducing her to a state that was almost cataleptic—by holding her hands while she was in that condition, and by forcing her into a physical state where I could compel her to stop breathing so long that the heart ceased to act and she was dead."

"How did you enter the car in order to be with her?"

"I got into it while it was in the garage at her country home, and was inside of it when she entered it to be driven to the city."

"How is it that you were not seen to enter it or to leave it?"

"Because I had already subjected the chauffeur to my influence sufficiently to make him forget that he had seen me."

"And so you hold yourself entirely responsible for the deaths of those two persons?"

"I do."

"Where is Miriam Archer?"

"She should be in her own room in the house on Riverside Drive, to which I sent her."

"Sent her from where?"

"From the bench on Riverside Drive, where I interviewed her."

"How did you interview her there?"

"I cast my influence upon her from a distance, and ordered her to come out and meet me."

"Did she meet you alone?"

"No, my companion was with me."

"This woman, who is here now?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"My wife."

"Has she had knowledge of these things you are telling me now?"

"She has assisted me in everything I have done."

"Is she also a hypnotist?"

"In a measure, yes."

"Why did you call Miriam Archer from her home to interview her?"

"I needed money. I ordered her to bring two hundred dollars to me; also a pearl collar, and a diamond pin that I had seen her wear."

"Did she bring them?"

"She did."

"Where are they now?"

"In my pocket."

"When Miriam Archer came from the country to the city, did she come by train or in a car with you and this woman?"

"She came with us in a car that I had hired for the purpose."

"What disposition did you make of her when you arrived in the city?"

"We took her to the Pennsylvania Station and left her there to come out of the station with other passengers, and with the suggestion in her mind that she had traveled to the city by train.

"Why did you bring her to the city with you in that car?"

"In order to get her more completely under my control, so that I might influence her from a distance."

The doctor made a few more passes over the man, and turned to the detective.

"Is there anything more?" he asked.

"Just one more question, for the sake of added proof," the detective replied: "I have here a memorandum secured late this afternoon from the register of automobile licenses, which I had temporarily forgotten. It tells me the name of the owner of automobile license number one seventy-one five thirteen, who is a man who conducts that kind of a livery. It also gives a list of names of persons to whom the car has been hired out recently. There are five or six names here, and one of them is the name under which this man hired the car in which he brought Miriam to the city. Ask him what name he gave when he hired that car."

"Tell what name it was!" the doctor commanded, tunring to his subject.

"Jacob Brown," was the instant reply.

"Correct," said Nick, and he returned the slip to his pocket. "We have now all the proof that could be desired, and there is now just one more question to ask."

"What is that?" asked the doctor. "He is now sufficiently under the influence to answer the question for me if you will ask it, for I will repeat it word for word mentally."

"How does it happen," Nick asked, "that if you were in the car with Mrs. Brayton at the time of her death, and brought that death to pass, that you were enabled to return to the railway station near Brayton Braes in time to be present there with your car when Miriam Archer arrived there en route to the city?"

"Because I had to ride only a few miles from Brayton Braes before accomplishing the death of Mrs. Brayton. My hired car was in waiting at an appointed place."

"You knew then that Miriam would go to the station and not proceed to the city in the car with which she first made the start?"

"I directed it."

"Did you know Ben Battle, the younger?"

"I did."

"What was he?"

"A cracksman, in England."

"Was he the man who originated these plottings against the house of Brayton and against Miriam Archer?"

"No; I did that."

"How was it suggested to you?"

"By the fact that I knew all about the letters that Ben's father had written to him from America. I knew about the fortune possessed by those childless people, and I worked out the plan of sending Miriam to them, after which, by suggestion, I believed that I could compel them to leave their fortune to her and ultimately could possess myself of it by the same methods."

"That's all," said Nick. "You can wake him up now."

The story is told. Of the ultimate confession of the woman companion of Aquilla, the hypnotist, and the long trial of these two persons in the courts, we need make no mention here. It is sufficient that Nick Carter had been eminently successful in his undertaking, and had proved the case that he had sought to accomplish.

THE END.

With only the words of an incomplete sentence to guide him in a search for the strangely disappearing Miriam Archer, Nick Carter, groping blindly, for a time, suddenly finds himself in a position of great peril. In attempting to deal with this situation, he realizes that he is overmatched. He is forced to pursue tactics other than any employed by him before. Whether or not these prove successful in extricating him from the misfortunes which befall him can only be known by reading the story entitled "A Six Word Puzzle; or, Nick Carter's Clew by Telephone," which will appear in the next issue of this weekly—No. 778, to be published on November 25th.

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